

# Private network is hot property

By David Adams  
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Source: 3DNetworks

Keeping track of property sales and rentals at Melbourne's MPRE real estate group used to mean constant phone calls between branches to ensure everyone had the latest information on listed properties.

The installation of a virtual private network, however, means all information - whether for homes on the market, sold or available for rent - is now located in a single location, able to be accessed from any of the group's 20 branches.

"Our stock sheets are live," says Brent Pullar, co-director of the MPRE franchise and director of the group's Frankston and Cranbourne offices.

"It's all got to be real-time because if a property goes under offer, the whole network needs to know about it. If there's a price reduction, if there's a new listing, if it's withdrawn - it's all real-time."

The move to the new network - which uses voice-over IP (VoIP) technology for phone calls between offices - has also had a significant effect in reducing telephony costs.

Citing his Frankston office as an example, Pullar says phone bills have dropped from highs of \$7000 to about \$3000 a month.

"The bigger offices came down by half, the other offices probably came down by around \$500," he says.

The MPRE real estate group was founded on the Mornington Peninsula in August 2000 with two offices. It now has 20 branch offices that employ about 160 staff, including more than 90 sales agents.

Roll-out of the voice and data network - which was designed by consultants Steadfast Solutions and installed by integrator 3D Networks - started in October last year with offices being progressively connected at a cost of about \$25,000 each. Eleven have so far been hooked up.

The network is based on Nortel Networks' Business Communications Manager (BCM) technology. Internet access is provided via a 1.5 Mbps connection to the head office in Frankston.

Ian Brady, project manager at Steadfast Solutions, says Nortel Networks' BCM product was attractive because it contained everything in a single box.

"It was basically getting the offices to plug into each other," Brady says, "so that if new franchisees come on board we put the box in the office and the equipment all goes in the one box and that's it, they're all fitted out."

MPRE boss Pullar says the installation of an intranet has also made the business much more efficient. Previously staff spent hours sending photographs between offices, but property pictures, along with such things as standard letters and staff information, are all stored centrally and can be accessed by anyone connected to the network.

"It's eliminated a lot of emails and faxing," Pullar says.

The system has also centralised call distribution, meaning calls coming into the head office can be transferred easily to a branch or directly to agents' mobile phones.

MPRE plans to introduce mobile technologies such as pocket PCs, which will enable staff to access property databases and other information contained on the intranet while on the move. Sales agents will be able to provide the latest information to potential buyers while they're actually looking through a property, and it also creates a more flexible workplace.

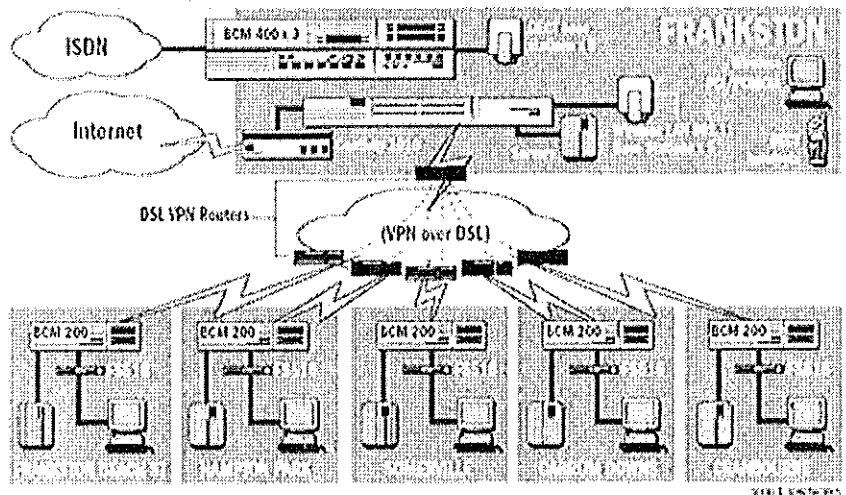
"Sales staff can work from home," Pullar says. "It's great for at night if you've got kids or whatever, and you can sit there and do your work - write all your ads and, if you've got listings, type in your listings and send them out to the group. You can really work from anywhere."

The group is also considering extending the functionality of the system to include video-conferencing and the ability to make calls directly from a web browser.

Pullar says the reason for the new technology wasn't always an easy concept to explain to some in the organisation, but "once they've got it, they can't live without it".

"It's given us flexibility but it's (also) given us the equipment to develop, expand and simplify things too. The intranet is just so much of a help . . . it brings us all closer together. Everyone's two seconds away."

## SPEAKING UP REALTOR'S NEW VOIP NETWORK



Source: *The Age*, Technology Daily